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AUTHOR Williams, Dilafruz
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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a comprehensive approach to program evaluation and suggests employing a number of methods in evaluating a program. Exclusive allegiance to one school of thought and adoption of one particular technique leads to limited comprehension about programs, and hence their evaluations. If evaluation is viewed as a process by which knowledge is gained about the program rather than merely for gathering data or information, then the next conceptual step would be to recognize that there are various models of knowing. Program evaluation should not only be intensive, but also extensive in scope, and utilize a variety of techniques and models. A wide variety of sources of data have to be used. A comprehensive approach to evaluation requires an evaluator who has a comprehensive approach to understanding, broadness in mental grasp of events, and an open-mindedness about learning. (LMO)

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A COMPREHENSIVE AND EDUCATIVE APPROACH

TO

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Dilafruz Williams
Syracuse University

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A COMPREHENSIVE AND EDUCATIVE APPROACH TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

Dilafruz Williams
Syracuse University

Abstract

It is argued in this paper that the dichotomies laid out between the scientific and humanistic methods of evaluation can no longer lure us into owing allegiance to exclusively one school of thought. If evaluation is viewed as a process by which we gain and provide knowledge about the program rather than as gathering data or information, then the next conceptual step would be to recognize that there are various modes of knowing and we posess a range of capacities by which we know. As a consequence, there is no single method or technique by which we can claim we gain knowledge. Hence, a comprehensive approach to program evaluation is proposed.

Introduction

Over the years, a variety of methods have evolved in the practice of evaluation, some of which are claimed to be conflicting, others complementary. Program evaluation has been traditionally viewed as serving the needs of the audience (often a state or federal agency), in a "scientific" manner. As a consequence of application of methodology of inquiry from the physical sciences, evaluation has been conceived as measurement whereby formalized instruments are used to collect quantifiable data which are scored and manipulated, emphasis mainly being on program outcomes.

Although still being largely followed, we have come a long way from this traditional view of evaluation. Several methodologies, techniques, and models[1] have emerged, each with its set of virtues. For instance, evaluation is seen as a process

of assessing the degree to which a program meets its stated goals and objectives. There are also the naturalistic approach, the responsive model, and the goal-free model of evaluation, to name a few. Furthermore, contrasts between formative and summative evaluation, process versus product orientation toward evaluation, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, have been set forth by the proponents of each of the techniques, methods, and models. Consequently, for a program evaluator, there is no dearth of models and techniques from which to select.

The Need for a Comprehensive Approach to Program Evaluation

On examining the various theories and models that guide the practice of evaluations of programs, it becomes clear that there is a need for a comprehensive approach to program evaluation. We could broadly categorize the schools of thought that at present guide evaluations into two methods of inquiry. One claims to be strictly scientific.[2] Since it relies on "hard" data for evidence it is considered objective, and has the potential for being reliable. This approach necessarily requires clarity in questions to be investigated right at the start; its design is formal, structured, specific, and often detailed in its plan of operation. The proponents of scientific approach, consider these characteristics as virtues; the opponents view them as vices. The other approach claims to be humanistic.[3] It is fairly open-ended in its design and thus tends to be broad and flexible. Reliance on "soft" data and a tendency to be more concerned about process than product, makes this approach qualitative and more

sensitive; unlike the former approach, since the context of activities is more important, humanistic evaluations are descriptive in nature. These are ofcourse viewed as virtues by the humanists. Needless to say, those who hold allegiance to scientific models consider these same set of criteria as vices.

To the proponents, their models are beset with virtues. While the debate over the virtues of evaluation using scientific or humanistic methods continues, the dichotomies between them are further emphasized and exaggerated. Setting apart various models as being antithetical, causes chisms in the enterprise of evaluation. While both are fairly correct in the claims they make, holding allegiance to any one school of thought is limiting. Neither approach can exclusively provide the best means for program evaluation. There is thus a need for inquiry into the measures required to combat this dualism.

This brings us to the epistemological nature of evaluation. The discourse of evaluation centers around "gathering data," or "gathering facts and information." I propose that evaluation be viewed as gaining and providing knowledge of the program. Now, there are various modes of knowing and we possess a range of capacities by which we gain knowledge: through observation, prior knowledge, history, experience, perception, memory, senses, interaction with others, foresight, deductive and inductive reasoning, analysis and synthesis, and so on. Accordingly, there is no single technique or method by which we can claim that we gain knowledge. Inasmuch as there is diversity in the modes of knowing, we cannot attribute a single technique or method as the

sole means by which we can evaluate a program. Since there is more than one way of knowing, neither the scientific nor the humanistic frameworks can claim exclusive authority over the best procedure for knowing.

My thesis is that exclusive allegiance to one school of thought and adoption of one particular technique, leads to limited comprehension about programs, and hence their evaluations. When evaluation is viewed as gaining and providing knowledge instead of gathering data or facts, it necessarily requires a comprehensive understanding of programs.

Towards a Comprehensive Approach to Program Evaluation

For accurate knowledge and comprehension, a general understanding of the program, its structure, goals and objectives, communication network, cultural and socio-political context within which it operates, constraints of operation, related activities, and so on, is essential. An evaluator is involved to a great degree in the search for knowledge about the program. Building on knowledge and establishing a firm foundation of knowledge requires that we add to what is known, and weed out and remove that which in the light of further knowledge seems untrue and erroneous; there must be room for doubt. The evaluator must be able to link the pieces of information together in order to gain comprehensive understanding of the program. Knowledge is not mere vertical addition; one must go through an intricately woven chain of reasoning in order to strengthen the foundations of one's grasp of the program and its operations.

By the term 'comprehensive' I mean that program evaluation should be not only intensive, but also extensive in scope, and utilize a variety of techniques and models, to evaluate the program. A comprehensive approach to evaluation is effective in so to say, "discovering the truth" in that it is: (i) broad in scope, comprising or including as much relevant knowledge as possible; (ii) holistic, rather than fragmentary and piece-meal; (iii) reliant on both "hard" and "soft" data, hence not limiting; (iv) educative for the program participants since it involves them, and communicates the evaluative knowledge (not merely "findings") to them such that these are utilized; and (v) facilitative, since it has an impact on future program performance and design.

For a comprehensive approach, a wide variety of sources of data have to be used. Furthermore, the evaluator must have a broad-based knowledge of the models from which to select, in order to gain comprehensive knowledge and understanding about the intricacies of the program. <u>That is, a comprehensive approach to evaluation requires an evaluator who has a comprehensive approach to understanding, broadness in mental grasp of events, and an open-mindedness about learning.</u>

Multiple methods when utilized as sources of evidence can generate a better perspective on the totality of reality. For example, observations, descriptions, examination of available documents and student records, subjective impressions, interviews,scientific inquiry, are all possibilities of gaining knowledge within the same program; utilizing one, need not <u>ipso</u>

facto negate the other. To exclude hard data in favor of soft data, or vice versa, is to gain a narrow perspective on the program's operations. The comprehensiveness of program evaluations lies in its ability to encourage the use of scientific inquiry along with humanistic models. Both the scientific and humanistic methods of inquiry require an evaluator who is curious, perplexed, and has imagination. Hence, "openness" in looking for a variety of sources and utilizing a variety of models which complement one another, is a must for comprehensive evaluation; seeking multiple dimensions in modes of knowing, is necessary for a better and a more accurate understanding of the program to be evaluated.

To evaluate a program effectively is to comprehend the totality of the operations of the program and the intricacies involved. This requires that a variety of models and techniques be utilized, or else the evaluation of programs will be narrow and in many ways, restrictive in scope. A comprehensive evaluation is seldom replicable from program to program; thus, it is not something that can be developed into a model that everyone can use. Rather, the "comprehensiveness" of evaluation lies in its being a philosophy, a style of approach, not a structure or a package that can be handed down to others.

The Educative Aspect of Evaluation

Comprehensive evaluations lend themselves toward being educative. The fundamental role of providing and communicating knoweldge will retract commercialization of evaluation and make

it an educative enterprise. Let me add that this approach in no way hinders meeting the requirements of the funding agencies and the stake-holders. Rather, it enriches what is done in the name of evaluation.

The educative aspect of evaluation can be seen in the following contexts of program evaluation:

(i) The presence of the evaluator generates a special kind of consciousness and awareness about the program,[4] i.e. the concept of program evaluation itself has the potential for educating the participants and decision-makers about the program.

(ii) The evaluator interacts with the participants, which gives several opportunities to informally communicate and generate an interest in evaluation, without being threatening.

(iii) In the area of communication of knowledge there is tremendous potential for educating the participants, the decision-makers, the funding agencies, the community wherever appropriate, and the general public at large. An evaluator can influence the utilization of evaluation, whereby the program can be improved if there is a need, or be made further effective.

Comprehensive evaluation is specifically educative in provision of knowledge, because of the following features: (a) Rather than provide bits and pieces of information that may often be unrelated, the totality of reality is captured. This becomes meaningful and educative to all concerned. No longer is program evaluation viewed as gathering data or information. Information is utilized by the evaluator not as an end but as a means to become knowledgeable and to provide knowledge. Because there is

unity and coherence in the assimilation of knowledge, the context of inquiry is not neglected. (b) In the area of conveyance and provision of knowledge in the form of reports, the evaluator has potential to educate. It must be assumed that not everybody involved in the program will understand the narrative which may include technical information or tables, graphs, and statistical data.[5] Conveyance of reports using evaluation "jargon" can be frustrating to many. Therefore, it is in the area of communicating knowledge, whether at various stages of program evaluation or at the end, that the potential for making evaluations meaningful to the audience can be realized.[6] Needless to say, the evaluation reports will no longer be for "show" nor will they collect dust. Rather, they will be utilized, because they will be perceived as sources of knowledge about the program.

(iv) Since the evaluator approaches the program with an attitude of open-mindedness, curiosity, interest, and responsibility, comprehensive evaluation is educative also for the evaluator.

Conclusion

A comprehensive and educative approach to program evaluation, not only helps the funding agency and the decision-makers, but it also assists the program participants to understand the significance of the relative context of the program within which they operate. By gaining knowledge, they can appreciate their own role and undertakings better, and acquire

the potential to function more effectively. This approach assists the program evaluator in gaining credibility, and confidence of the participants. It must be clear from the above discussion that a comprehensive approach to program evaluation requires an evaluator who has broad-based knowledge, which has tremendous implications on the education of evaluators qua evaluators.

FOOTNOTES

1. The terms 'models', 'methods' and 'techniques' are used interchangeably in this paper.

2. This approach is also addressed as quantitative methodology.

3. Other concepts associated with the humanistic approach are naturalism and qualitative methodology.

4. According to Cronbach, the evaluator is a teacher in many ways. "Teaching begins when the evaluator first sits down with members of the policy-shaping community to elicit their questions. It continues during every contact that the evaluator has with program participants or with others in his audience... Educating is as much a matter of raising questions as of providing answers." See Cronbach, Lee J. Designing Evaluations of Education and Social Programs (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982), pp. 9-10.

5. See Morris Lynn Lyons and Carol Taylor Fitz-Gibbon. How to Present an Evaluation Report (California: Sage, 1978). They provide an excellent account on the procedures to be adopted while presenting reports, whether written, or verbal.

6. Morris and Fitz-Gibbon explain that this requires a simple common-sense approach: writing the report in simple, clear language; using tables and graphs which are self-explanatory. Wherever necessary, footnotes should be provided. Writing summaries, emphasizing certain critical phrases, drawing blocks around particular findings, using graphs, and so on, are factors which generate an interest, prevent monotony, and generally move more sophisticated readers of such reports through the major points. For verbal presentations, audio-visual aids can be utilized. Presentations that are to the point, are more effective and educative.